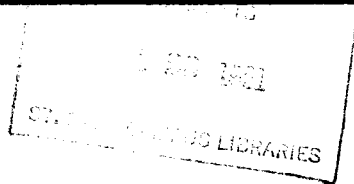


AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICE

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

FAMILY DEVELOPMENT FACT SHEET No. 16—1979 SUSAN S. MEYERS



You're an In-Law, Too!

In-law problems are rated as the third most difficult adjustment problem in early marriage, preceded only by money and sex problems. Concern over in-laws may be major or minor, depending upon the individuals involved and how they perceive the situation.

YOU'RE AN IN-LAW, TOO!

Textbooks on marriage and the family seldom deal with in-laws as they relate to the young couple. Most writings assume the source of any in-law problem is the parents-in-law. This implies that the parents-in-law are the tyrants and the children-in-law are the angels having problems bestowed upon them. Often we fail to recognize that we (the young married couples) are in-laws, too. Once we can accept that few problems are directed entirely one way, we can more adequately look for solutions—if you aren't part of the solution, you are part of the problem. After all, you are an in-law, too!

What causes in-law problems? Let's look at the jokes and cartoons. We have an extremely vicious way of attacking in-laws, mothers-in-law in particular. If we study the cartoons directed at mothers-in-law, we see an image of a talkative, ego-deflating, mean, meddlesome, trouble-making woman who knows all the answers—the wrong ones—and is a loathsome object of aggression who comes too often and stays too long. These jokes are funny at the time, but this image may last long after the laughter has died down. Many times our perceptions, although unconscious, may be based upon the jokes openly expressed in our homes. One way to begin minimizing in-law problems is to cease telling these jokes and stop laughing at them.

One misconception the jokes have created is that most in-law problems are men's problems. The typical picture is the poor young son-in-law harassed by his overbearing mother-in-law. According to most studies in this area, most in-law problems are women's problems. Men seldom are involved directly in the in-law problems, or perhaps they can escape them more easily. Even though women do have more of the problems, it's possible that any family situation may be different. Unless we allow for these differences, we may create problems that never existed in the first place.

Why would more women be involved in in-law problems than men? Many theories are expressed. One reason may be because women usually have the responsibility for the social life and correspondence for the family. Therefore, women are involved more directly in the daily lives of relatives. Another reason may be that women have been considered more sensitive and tied more directly with their family and therefore would be more concerned with family matters. As our social patterns change (men may become more expressive and the roles may

become more similar), we may find that both men and women have comparable in-law problems.

PERCEPTIONS OF ROLES

A role is a socially prescribed pattern of behavior corresponding to an individual's position in a particular society. For example, a man may be playing the role of grandfather at a given moment, but he also may play roles of breadwinner, husband, father-in-law, son, or manager.

The cause of some problems in early marriage is that we don't know exactly what our relationship is going to be with our in-laws. Perhaps we are thrown into a close relationship with in-laws without really knowing much about them. Trying to establish independence from parents and in-laws, while still maintaining a close relationship with them, is basic to in-law problems. We want to be accepted by our families, yet maintain our individuality as a couple. This realignment of loyalties is necessary in early marriage as a young couple establishes its new identity.

The first time this may become a real problem after marriage is when a couple tries to decide what to do with major holidays. It is not unusual for both of you to feel you should spend holidays with your own families. Your family traditions are strongly ingrained in you. Because there are now two sets of relatives involved, there may be a problem. Many couples avoid deciding which family gets visited first on a major holiday (for example, who do you visit for Thanksgiving, or Christmas?). Family traditions—what you are used to doing—must be changed so that you, as a new family, will have your own traditions. This is not easy at first because of your family loyalties and the desire to do what you are used to doing. You may have a more complicated problem depending upon how far you live from each family and how each of your siblings—brothers and sisters, if any—handle family gatherings. Sometimes visiting one family on one holiday and the other family the next holiday is not really the way to keep everyone happy. Some couples have had two Thanksgiving dinners in one day—this may help socially but also is hard on the waistline.

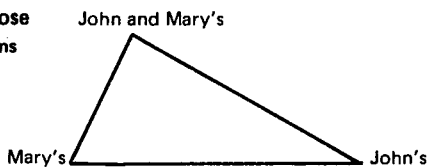
Another major problem you may face is what to call your in-laws. You wouldn't address someone as "mother-in-law," but "hey you" or nothing at all is worse yet. Some couples don't decide what to call their parents-in-law until the grandchildren begin calling them by pet names, such as "nanna" or "grandma." By then, feelings may have been hurt. "Mr." and "Mrs." are usually a bit formal but even this is better than nothing. Ideally, the children and parents will agree upon some name they feel comfortable with, perhaps mother, father, a first name, or a pet name. Once this little problem is settled it's surprising how other situations become much easier to handle.

THE PARENT-IN-LAW

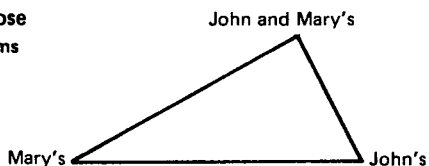
Let's look at the problem facing the new mother-in-law. If she gives too much assistance or advice, she may disrupt the couple's privacy. If she doesn't, she appears cool, aloof, indifferent, and "doesn't care about them." Very few parents-in-law admit that they have in-law problems; it's the children-in-law who usually do most of the complaining. Perhaps, as some authors suggest, parents-in-law are more tolerant because they were once children-in-law themselves. Children-in-law probably could do more toward smoothing out in-law problems.

According to Evelyn Duvall, each married couple belongs to three families. Let's look at a typical couple, John and Mary. They first of all belong to themselves; but, at the same time, they also belong to John's family and to Mary's. In order to establish a strong family of their own, they must place their new family above either John's or Mary's. Unless the strength in the new family is stronger than the loyalties to the parents' homes, the new family is threatened.

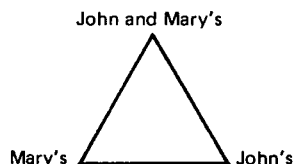
Mary's family too close
John has in-law problems



John's family too close
Mary has in-law problems



John and Mary's family comes first
Neither has in-law problems



In the first case, John has in-law problems because Mary's family is too close. This may be because Mary is too immature to pull away from her parents. It may be that one or more members of Mary's family is too possessive to let her go. It may be that unusual circumstances (ill health or financial problems) cause her to give more loyalty and time than would be expected in establishing their new family. The development of John and Mary's family has been delayed or weakened.

In another problem situation, John's family is too close so Mary has in-law problems. Because John is bound too tightly to his family, Mary is pulled from hers and John and Mary make little progress toward establishing their family unit.

In a balanced situation, John and Mary's family comes first in their loyalties. They are not threatened by bonds to either John's or Mary's in-laws and are able to make progress in establishing their identity. They are able to combine the traditions of each family into their own because John and Mary do not find these traditions threatening to their relationship.

IN-LAW PROBLEMS OF PARENTS

Some parents have a difficult time letting their children lead their own lives. This seems basic to an in-law's problems during middle age. Other parents have planned for the independence of their children for years. These parents are much more ready to accept the dependence of their child on another person. It is difficult for many a parent to realize he is no longer the most important person in his child's life. Perhaps this is selfish, but it is a human reaction built up over many years. Also, some children are not willing to accept this independence. They still prefer to rely on their parents for help. We need to recognize that good in-laws are mature. And as we mature, regardless of age, we are more able to deal pleasantly and satisfactorily with others. Mature in-laws are willing to give more than 50 percent effort to make the relationship work.

Parents-in-law can help by not getting upset everytime something goes wrong. It is better to express differences of opinion when a problem arises instead of carrying a grudge—possibly for years. The problem should be expressed and handled at that time or removed from your file drawer of problems forever. A simple way of driving your child away from you is by being resentful of his or her spouse for years and subtly letting it show. Accept the fact that your children may take several years to adjust to problems (in-law and others) of their new life. As a parent, it is too easy to try to dictate what your children should do. This can cause many unnecessary problems. In-law problems are not a one-way street; it takes two people to make trouble.

Remember, you are an in-law, too!

FURTHER READING

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